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Sue Rivers Online Lurking and Learning: The emergence of a pedagogy of silence? (Full Paper)*

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Paper:

Online lurking and learning: the emergence of a pedagogy of silence?

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Introduction

This paper examines the significance of online silence for teaching and learning. Research into networked collaborative learning often involves analysing the content of online discussions in order to assess what learning takes place. However, in this doctoral research, the online programme studied featured widespread non-participation; sometimes referred to as 'lurking' or 'silence'. Researchers studying collaborative work need to interpret and understand the role of periods of apparent inactivity as well as observable active study, even if it is difficult to conceptualise (Littleton, 1999: 182). It seems likely that participants in collaborative discussions will not verbalise all that they are learning and that learning takes place both in and outside of the discussions.

Theoretical Basis

Online silence as a space for learning

Silence is frequently associated with reflection. Reflection is said to be particularly important to professionals; both reflection after an event and reflection-in-action (a kind of spontaneous research) Schön (1983); Brookfield (1995). Buckner and Morss (1999: 37) acknowledge that reflective thought is important to a rich learning experience and recognise that in online learning students need to have sufficient time to reflect on issues raised in a debate before making their own contribution.

According to Harasim *et al.* (1995: 194) online learning promotes reflection, in that students can review and reread what has taken place as often as is needed for understanding and retention. Light and Light (1999: 170) support this view, suggesting that computer conferencing is good for quiet, reflective people. This particularly applies to those who wait for the argument to develop and tend to take time to think about it, or would like to go and research the issue before saying anything. However, this shyness can also cause some people to be too inhibited to voice their ideas or questions, albeit in writing, rather than face-to-face. In addition, as Hammond's research (1999: 357) found, there are built-in paradoxes: the permanence of online messages may help reflection, but also inhibits potential contributors who do not want their messages available to permanent scrutiny.

Is online silence anti-social?

There are two principal types of online silence: (a) logging on to a conference and reading other contributions to a discussion but not posting up a contribution yourself (commonly known as 'lurking') and (b) not reading the discussion threads at all (for example by failing to log on). Feenberg (1989: 24) points out that asynchronous conferencing may mean that unusual delay is interpreted as a sign of rejection or indifference since there is no mechanical excuse for silence. He describes online silence as 'a message that is both brutal and ambiguous' (*ibid*: 34).

The use of derogatory terms like 'lurking' tend to suggest that non-participation, particularly in the context of online collaborative learning, is fundamentally anti-social. However, Wenger (1998: 57) claims that our engagement with the world is social even when it does not clearly involve social interactions with others. Even when an individual is preparing a presentation alone in a hotel room, this is social because the audience is 'there': their colleagues are looking over their shoulder, representing accountability to their professional community.

The concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave, Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998: 100) suggests that it may be 'legitimate' (i.e. acceptable) for a 'lurker' to read other participants' messages, by way of apprenticeship, before becoming a full participant. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest it is important not to mistake silence for inertia or disengagement and point to the value of reflective silence (*ibid*: 65). They believe that email (and, by analogy online learning) allows time for reflection (*ibid*: 122) and imply that students are 'saying too little' only when it becomes a problem for their learning (*ibid*: 178).

However, in the case of collaborative online learning, this fails to take into account the possible effect on other learners. Too much silence may hinder the learning of the rest of the group who cannot benefit from the very sharing of diverse opinions that the authors extol (Brookfield, Preskill, 2005: 3, 4 and 9). In this sense it could be argued that non-participation is fundamentally undemocratic as one person's autonomous decision not to post messages (despite rules on minimum postings required) can decrease the richness of the others' learning experience. Students may be 'saying too little' when it becomes a problem for the learning of others.

Methodology and Methods

Methodology

Analysing silence is methodologically challenging! In the researched programme, virtual ethnography (ethnography conducted online) was used in order to understand how online learning took place. Hammersley (1992:43-44) points out that ethnography is commonly justified in that, by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people in their ordinary lives, we can understand their behaviours more accurately than by other approaches.

Virtual ethnography enables the researcher to gain a reflexive understanding of what it is like to be part of the internet and to learn through the same medium as informants (Hine, 2000: 10). Instead of being a detached and invisible analyst, it is possible to be active and visible within the field setting (*ibid*: 23).

The fieldwork involved spending nine months as an online student; learning, and experiencing life first hand, with a cohort of e-learners. The researched programme was conducted entirely online and did not involve face-to-face meetings or seminars. A key part of the programme was four months of intensive online discussions, moderated by a tutor but led by each of the students in turn. I participated fully in this programme, including taking the assessment along with my fellow students. This was not therefore 'participant observation' as such, but a very much more active approach for which I used the expression 'participant participation'.

The data

The data consisted of my field notes and research diary as well as the transcripts of the seven online conferences which had taken place during the 4-month research period, including one particular exchange from the social area. In total this amounted to 191 individual postings by the conference participants. There were also transcripts of 14 interviews conducted with students and tutors.

The interviews incorporated critical event recall techniques (Tuckwell, 1980; Kagan, 1984; Kagan, Kagan, 1991; Lally, 2002; Steeples, 2004; Carr *et al*., 2006). This is a method of stimulating recall of an occurrence based on the premise that humans store up large amounts of information about events which they have participated in, much of the detail of which may be soon forgotten but can be recalled with appropriate stimulation. In the case of a group of learners, it may enable previously unexpressed aspects of the learning experience to be recalled and verbalised; for example, the interviewee is able to reflect upon and analyse the transcript extracts, and, in so doing, verbalise what was not directly observable from them (De Laat, Lally, 2003).

The rationale for using this technique, apart from its inherent value, was to triangulate other forms of analysis (Lally, 2002). This is due to the complexity of the learning processes involved in online networked learning and the desire to gain a fuller understanding of learning processes than might be possible by using content analysis alone including the need to probe the 'thinking behind the text' (*ibid*.).

Data analysis

A preliminary analysis of the content of conference transcripts was undertaken using categories emerging from the messages themselves, without detailed reference to the literature, drawing upon grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Strauss , Corbin, 1998). Further data analysis was carried out in the light of the literature review. The validity of this approach has been acknowledged by researchers in this field (McConnell, 2000; Lally, De Laat, 2002, 2003; Steeples, 2004; McConnell 2005, 2006). The advantage is that it allows for correction of errors by refining data collection and is flexible enough to allow the researcher to redirect the analysis as new issues emerge (Charmaz, 2000: 522-3). It is therefore particularly suited to research in new or under-researched fields, such as those in which there are significant gaps in theory, as is the case with online networked learning.

I read and re-read the transcripts of the online conferences and interviews to let themes emerge in a naturalistic way. I experimented with various grids or frameworks for analysis taking into account the work of Henri (1992) and Garrison and Anderson (2003). I designed and developed my own framework by listing my research questions, breaking them down into components and using these directly as the headings for analysis for both conference scripts and interviews.

> I freely acknowledge that attempting to analyse silence is challenging and that there may be no foolproof way of knowing everything that was going on in and outside of the conferences. However, I would contend that my approach has made some inroads into this difficult and complex area.

Findings

Occurrence of silence

I defined online silence as a significant gap between postings, determined a 'significant' gap as three days or more and identified three categories of silence:

1. *Total silence:* no-one in the group posting to a particular conference
2. *Individual silence:* a particular individual not contributing to a conference
3. *Partial silence:* only one or two students contributing to a particular conference and the others were not.

Categories two and three are not mutually exclusive, that is, when one or two people are contributing but other individuals in the group are not, there is both partial and individual silence occurring.

During the four -month period covered by the conferencing I identified fourteen instances of total silence, ranging in duration from three days to fourteen days, the average length being 5.8 days. Individual silence was clearly acceptable behaviour for some students, notably Male 2 who only contributed four postings in total and did not participate at all in four of the seven conferences.

Partial silence occurred at the start of the first conference when the leader, Male 3, made five consecutive postings without any other student joining in. It took 20 days for all students to post a message. It is possible to interpret this as an example of legitimate peripheral participation, where new members were being introduced into the group (Lave ,Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Light, Light, 1999).

Partial silence was particularly noticeable in three of the conferences: Conferences 4, 6 and 7, where the tutor was at times forced to 'become a student' in order to sustain the discussions due to non-participation by a number of people, especially two of the male participants (Males 1 and 2) and, to a lesser extent, two of the females (Females 1 and 2). In Conference 6 only two students in the cohort (Male 3 and myself) participated. The final conference was structured differently to the others, with three linked threads, but only three students participated:

Online silence: evidence of learning

> Interviewees found it difficult to say what learning had been going on in times of silence. Even when they were taken through the relevant conference scripts in interview and asked specifically about these times, they could not remember whether or what they were learning at those specific moments. However, the conference transcripts revealed some relevant evidence; for example, there was clearly some email contact between participants outside of the conferences, in order to share and solve particular problems, especially over technical matters. Almost all learners said in interview that, outside of the conferences, they looked up resources posted by others:
> *I did pursue about getting a copy of 'E-tivities' at one point...I looked at some of the stuff especially that Guardian article that [the tutor] mentioned. I read through that and I think I put some feedback on that one. Generally speaking if people put a link on I'd have a look.*

(Male 3, interview).

There was evidence that people discovered resources outside of the main conferencing area, reflected, then came back to the conferencing with new thoughts and ideas to share with others:

Recommend reading "King Content" section of "E-Learning the Second Wave" recently posted as attachment to message of same title in [the café].
(Tutor, Conference 5).

Wow ... - that Article really got me thinking. I wonder if my own experience of e-learning relates much at all to what the author was talking about! What wave am I in - probably fallen off my ancient surf board by now!
(Sue, Conference 5).

I had been reading the book 'E-tivities' (Salmon, 2002) which suggested ways to respond to messages encouragingly, and gave the example of a reply which began with "Wow!" (Salmon, 2002: 59). I therefore started my posting using the same word to be positive and enthusiastic, with view to encouraging further dialogue. What I had learned in the silence outside of the conferences directly affected my activity in that conference.

Silence in the learning process is often associated with reflection, which is thought to be particularly beneficial for adult professional learners (Schön (1983); Brookfield (1995)). One of the benefits of computer conferencing identified in the literature is that it allows participants thinking time before posting (Buckner, Morss, 1999; Light ,Light, 1999; Brookfield, Preskill, 2005). This view was supported by the evidence from the researched programme:

I wanted to contribute to and other things I felt well I couldn't. I read quite a lot what was going on but I didn't in all cases contribute to the message 'cos I didn't feel - possibly I needed time to think about what to say so possibly in some cases I didn't have that time to do it.
(Male 1, interview).

Those who stated in interview that they needed time to think before posting were generally slow to post and the most silent online. They also tended to display reflective learning styles whilst online, which accords with research showing that computer conferencing is good for quiet, reflective people (Light , Light, 1999). These people clearly need silence as a space for their learning:

Sue: *Was there any specific reason why you didn't post something up if you actually logged on and read..?*

Female 2: *Yes, yes because I am very, very, very methodical. I sit and think about things for hours. I mean I would wake up in the middle of the night and I would be thinking about it. But I think that's me.*
(Female 2, interview).

Online silence: a hindrance to learning?

Whilst, for some people, silence may have been an opportunity to think and prepare before posting, for others it was clearly frustrating and bewildering:

I was a bit frustrated with people that they weren't doing what they should be doing...I wanted regular contributions to be made and they weren't being made...
(Male 3, interview).

In cases where the voices of participants are unheard there may be a feeling that the cohort has been deprived of the potential richness of all the possible views and experience which could have provided fulfilling collaboration:

I'm thinking about [Female 1] – who's another person a very, very experienced person she'd already been on umpteen online things and is involved you know designing courses for [name] and all this stuff and I would have loved to know, ...more of what she had to say...
(Sue, when interviewing the Tutor).

Those who were contributing a lot felt that the non-participants were failing to take their turn and 'saying too little' and that this was a problem for the learning of the cohort. This seems in line with Brookfield and Preskill's views (2005) that reflective silence may be valuable to individuals, especially to introverted or intimidated students but, by implication, too much silence can have a negative effect on learning. This is supported by the acknowledgement of one of the low posters:

Maybe I reflect a little too much and don't do enough…I think it probably didn't help because I was reflecting and not doing it, it really didn't help.

(Female 2, interview).

Much is made of how power may be exercised, particularly between the sexes, by devices such as deliberate use of silence, interruption, setting the tone and showing expertise in ways that may be difficult to challenge (Dendrinos, Pedro, 1997). Although it may not be technically possible to interrupt in asynchronous computer conferencing, it is possible to dominate by indirectly preventing others 'speaking'. In the researched programme, this was not always gender specific; an example is the start of Conference 3 for which Male 1 was the leader:

I think learner motivation is an important issue regarding online learning, so what do you all think?
(Male 1, Conference 3).

If we are looking at learner motivation we should consider...[gives long list of points]. This is not exhaustive but these are some points that quickly spring to mind. Others can add to this.
(Male 3, Conference 3).

Here Male 3 came in before the tutor's 'obligatory second message' and almost swamped the leader's contribution by imposing his own content and method of dealing with the subject (listing). Arguably this is the equivalent of interruption online as well as an exertion of power.

If remaining silent amounts to ignoring the poster's wish for (or perceived right to) a reply, online silence may also be the equivalent of face-to-face interruption, in that it amounts to exerting power. For example, I asked a series of questions at the end of Conference 4. These never received a reply from any of the other students and the conference ended in mid air with no summary from the leader. This left me with a feeling of being stranded or abandoned, with my questions left unanswered.

A Pedagogy of Online Silence

The pedagogy of online silence involves balancing the learning rights of individuals with that of the group. It was clear in the researched programme that particular individuals did learn by, or despite, lurking. The tutor's personal belief was that the most important thing was whether learning had taken place. This implied that, ultimately, it did not matter whether an individual had contributed little to the conferencing. These values were highly significant and may have prevented the tutor from actively encouraging greater participation.

It is impossible to collaborate on your own; therefore, on a programme for which collaboration is a fundamental requirement, online silence by individuals is antisocial if it deprives other people of group collaboration. This is in line with Brookfield and Preskill's view (2005) that reflective silence may be valuable to individuals but too much silence can have a negative effect on learning. However, my findings go further and show that individuals are saying too little when it becomes a problem for *the group's* learning.

Accordingly tutors need to balance the needs of individual learners with those of the group, so as to maximise opportunities for learning. They need to allow sufficient silence for people to reflect and learn whilst also encouraging optimum participation so that the group can benefit from the views and experience of others. If collaboration is a fundamental of networked online learning, institutions need to have a clear policy on how much contribution is required by individuals and learners should provide evidence of collaboration as part of their assessment. It should not be possible to pass the assessment without making a minimum contribution towards collaboration and assessment strategies should positively recognise and reward contributions towards collaboration.

This research shows the importance of silence in facilitating online learning and the effect of lurking on collaboration. It will enable those designing and moderating online discussions to plan for and manage silence in order to enrich learning communities.

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